

Alexander Kuprin

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# THE ELEPHANT

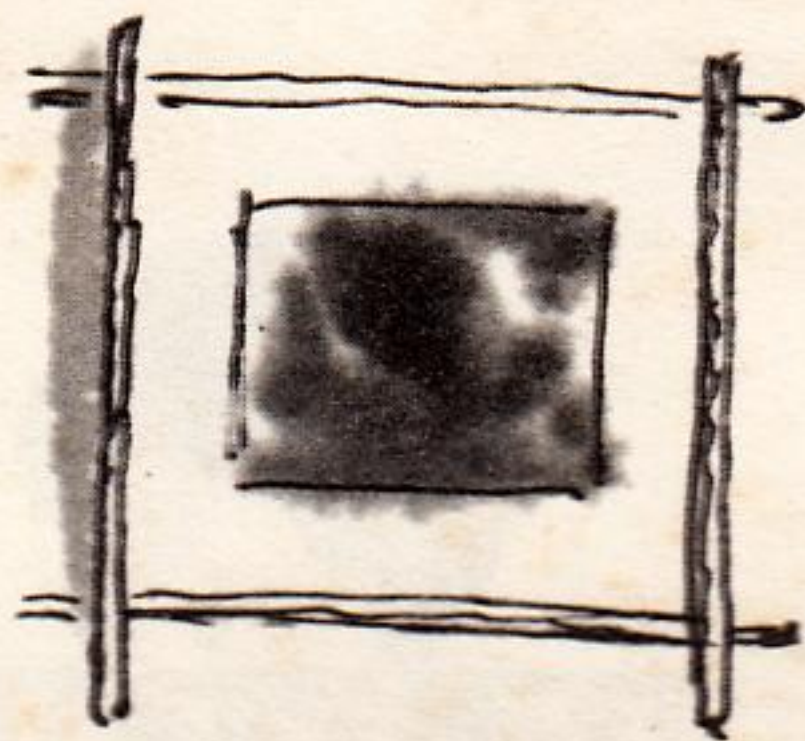
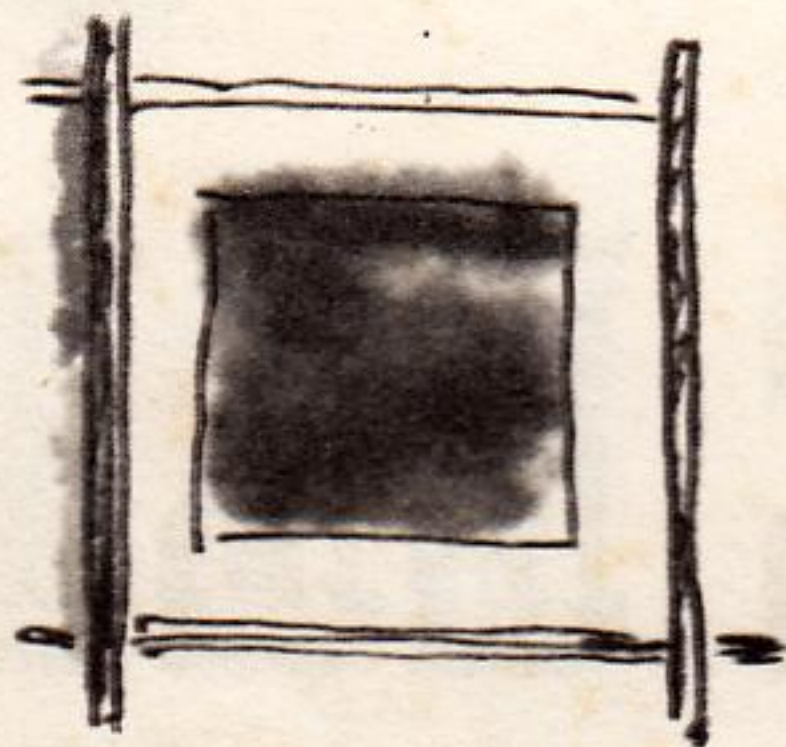
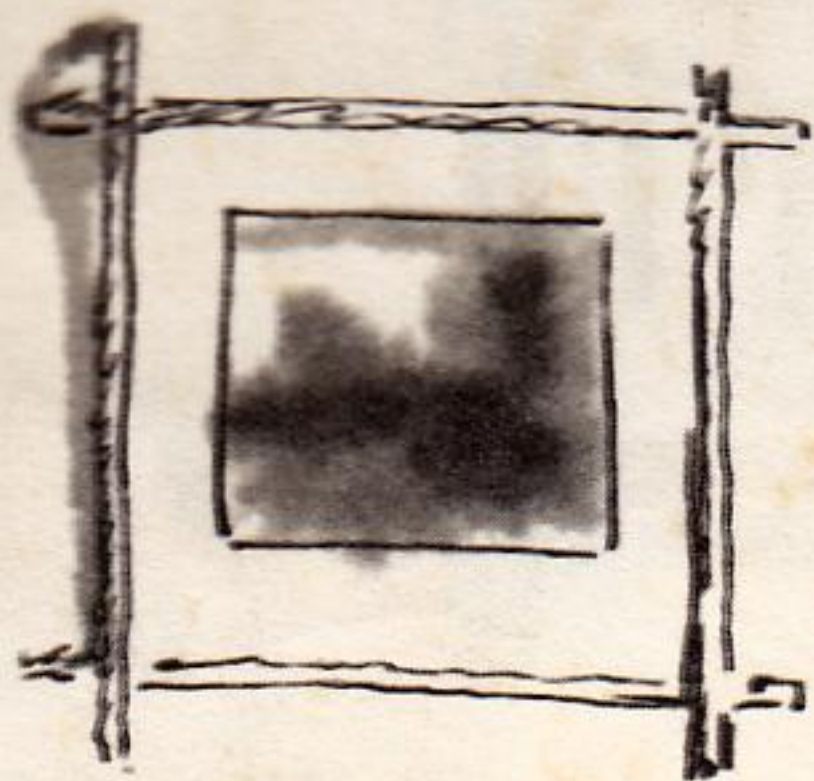
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# I

A little girl was ill. Each day the doctor, Mikhail Petrovich, whom she had known for a very, very long time, came to see her. Sometimes, there were two other doctors with him whom she did not know. They would turn her on her stomach and then on her back, listening for something, their ears



pressed to her body, pulling down her eyelids and looking. All the while their faces were very stern, and they made important huffing sounds, and spoke to each other in a strange tongue.

Then they would leave the nursery and go into the parlour, where her mother awaited them. The most important-looking doctor, a tall, grey-haired man in gold-rimmed eyeglasses, spoke to her for a long time in a very serious tone. The door was not shut, and so the girl could see and hear everything from her bed. There was much she could not understand, but she knew they were talking about her. Her mother looked at the doctor from her large, tired eyes that were red from weeping. In parting, the doctor said in a loud voice:

"Try to see that she is never bored, and fulfil her every wish."

"Oh, doctor! That's just it! She doesn't want anything!"

"Hm... Well then, try to think of what she used to like before she became ill. Some toys ... or sweets...."

"Doctor, she doesn't want anything."

"Then try to arouse her interest in something.... Try anything.... Take my word for it, if you are able to make her laugh, to be happy, it will be the very best medicine. You must understand that your daughter's illness is simply an indifference to life, and nothing more. Good-day, Madame."

## II

"Darling, isn't there anything you'd like? Tell me, Nadya," her mother said.

"No, Mamma, I don't want anything."

"Would you like me to bring you all your dolls? We can put the little armchairs, the sofa, the table and the tea set on your bed. The dolls will have tea and talk about the weather and their children's health."

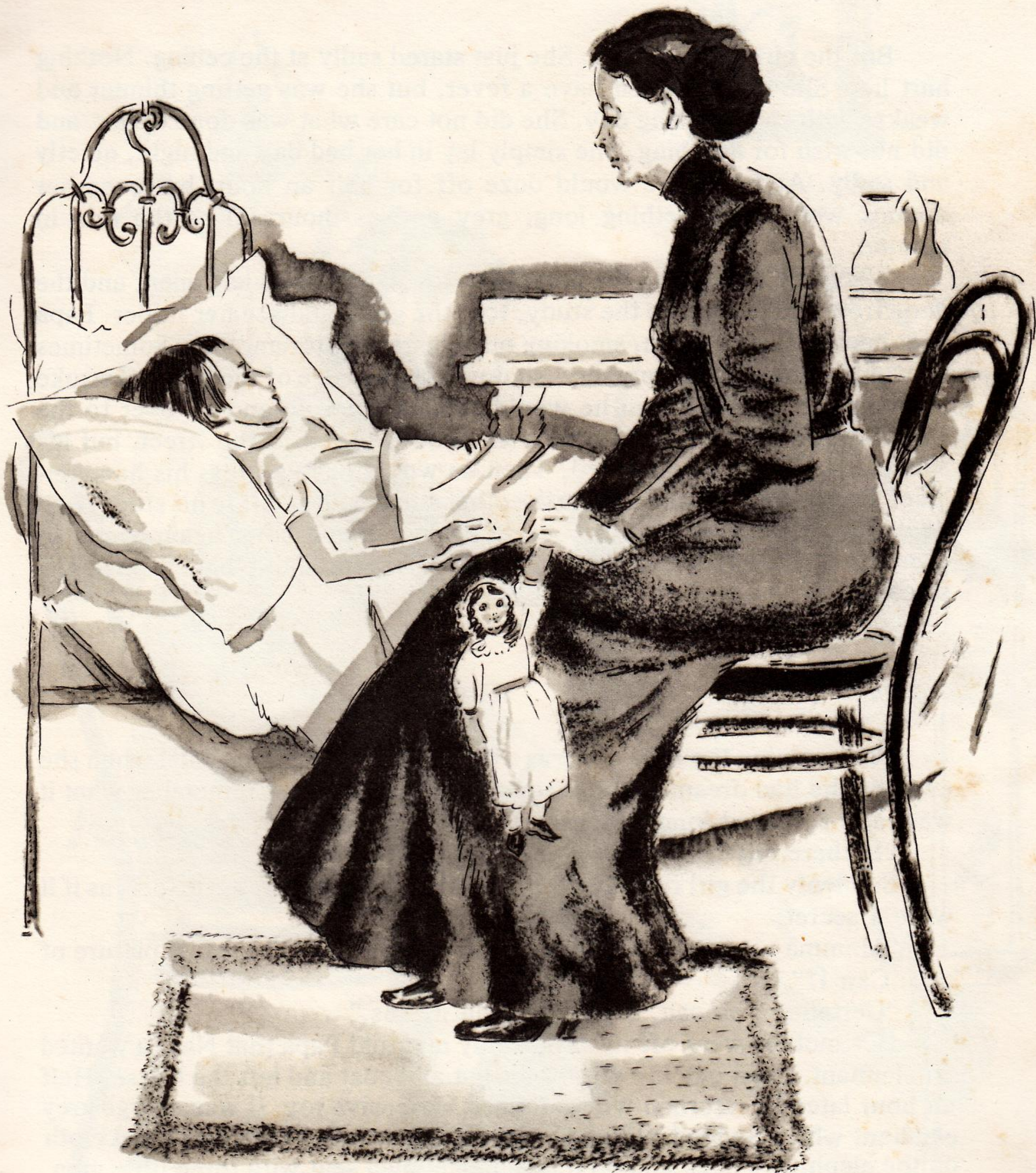
"Thank you, Mamma... But I don't want them... I'm so bored...."

"All right, dear, we won't play dolls. Would you like me to call Katya or Zhenya? They're your best friends."

"No, don't, Mamma. Please, don't. There's not anything I want at all. Oh, I'm so bored!"

"Would you like a bar of chocolate?"







But the girl did not reply. She just stared sadly at the ceiling. Nothing hurt her. She did not even have a fever, but she was getting thinner and weaker with each passing day. She did not care what was done to her, and did not wish for anything. She simply lay in her bed day and night, quietly and sadly. At times she would doze off for half an hour, but even her dreams were of something long, grey and as mournful as the rain in autumn.

When the door from the nursery to the parlour was left open, and the door from the parlour to the study, too, the girl could see her father. Papa kept pacing up and down, smoking one cigarette after another. Sometimes he would come into the nursery, sit down on the edge of the bed and stroke Nadya's feet gently. Then he would suddenly get up and go over to the window. He would whistle a tune as he looked out at the street, but his shoulders would be convulsed. Then he would hastily press his handkerchief first to one eye and then to the other and would go off to his study, as if he were cross. There he would begin pacing up and down again, smoking cigarette after cigarette.... His study would become fairly blue from all the smoke.

### III

One morning the little girl was a bit more cheerful than usual when she awoke. She had dreamed about something, but couldn't remember what it was, and so gazed long and intently into her mother's eyes.

"Is there anything you'd like?" her mother asked.

Suddenly the girl remembered her dream and said in a whisper, as if it were a secret:

"Mamma ... can I have an ... elephant? But I don't mean a picture of one. Can I?"

"Certainly you can, darling. By all means."

Her mother went off into the study and told Papa that Nadya wanted an elephant. Papa quickly put on his hat and coat and left the house. Half an hour later he returned with a lovely, expensive toy. It was a large grey elephant which nodded its head and swished its tail. There was a red cloth on the elephant's back and on it a gold canopied seat with three little men.







But the girl looked at the toy as indifferently as she did at the ceiling and the walls, and her voice when she spoke was listless.

"No. That's not what I meant at all. I wanted a real, live elephant, but this one is dead."

"Wait a minute, Nadya," Papa said. "I'll wind it up, and it will be just like a real, live one."

He wound up the elephant with a little key, and it nodded its head and swished its tail as it began to move its feet and walk slowly across the table. The girl was not at all interested. In fact, she was bored, but she did not want to disappoint her father and so whispered obediently:

"Thank you ever so much, dear Papa. I don't think anyone I know has such a lovely toy. But.... Remember, long ago, you promised to take me to the animal circus to see a real elephant ... and you never did."

"But, darling, try to understand that this is quite out of the question. An elephant is very big. It's as tall as the ceiling and can't fit into our house.... Besides, where will I find one?"

"Oh, I don't need such a big one, Papa. A little one will be just as good, as long as it's alive. Even if it's only this big.... Even a teeny-weeny one."

"My sweet, I'd do anything for you, but this is something I can't do. Why, it's just the same as if you'd suddenly said: 'Reach up and get me the sun from the sky, Papa.'"

She smiled sadly.

"You're so silly, Papa. Don't you think I know you can't get the sun, because it'll burn you! Or the moon, either. Oh, I wish I had a baby elephant ... a real one."

She closed her eyes and whispered, "I'm so tired ... Don't be angry at me, Papa...."

Her father clapped his hands to his head and rushed off to his study. She could see him pacing about there for a while. Then he threw his half-finished cigarette to the floor (something Mamma always scolded him for) and shouted to the maid:

"Get my hat and coat, Olga!"

His wife followed him to the foyer and asked: "Where are you going, Sasha?"

He was breathing hard as he buttoned up his coat.



"I don't know myself.... But I think I'll really bring back a live elephant today."

His wife looked at him anxiously. "Are you well, dear? Do you have a headache? Perhaps you did not sleep well?"

"I did not sleep at all," he replied crossly. "I see you'd like to ask me whether I'm insane. Not yet. Goodbye. Everything should be settled by this evening."

The front door banged loudly, and he was gone.

#### IV

Two hours later he was in a front-row seat at the animal circus, watching the trained animals perform for their master. The clever dogs jumped, turned somersaults, danced, howled to music and spelled out words with large cardboard letters. The monkeys, some of which had on red skirts and others blue trousers, walked across a tightrope and rode a large poodle. Huge tawny lions jumped through burning hoops. A lumbering seal fired a pistol. The elephants were in the last act. There were three of them: one large elephant and two very small, midget elephants, although each was bigger than a horse. It was strange to see these huge animals, so clumsy and awkward to look at, perform the most difficult tricks which even a very agile person would never be able to do. The biggest elephant was the most clever of the three. It first stood up on its hind legs, then sat down, stood on its head with its feet in the air, walked over wooden bottles, walked on a rolling barrel, turned the pages of a large cardboard book with its trunk and, finally, sat down at a table, having first tied a napkin round its neck, and ate its dinner just like a well-mannered child.

Soon the show was over. The audience was leaving. Nadya's father went up to the roly-poly German owner of the animal circus. He was standing in his box with a large black cigar clenched between his teeth.

"I beg your pardon," Nadya's father said. "Would you agree to letting your elephant come to my house for a short while?"

The German's eyes grew wide. He gaped, and the cigar fell out of his mouth. He bent over with a grunt, picked it up and stuck it back into his



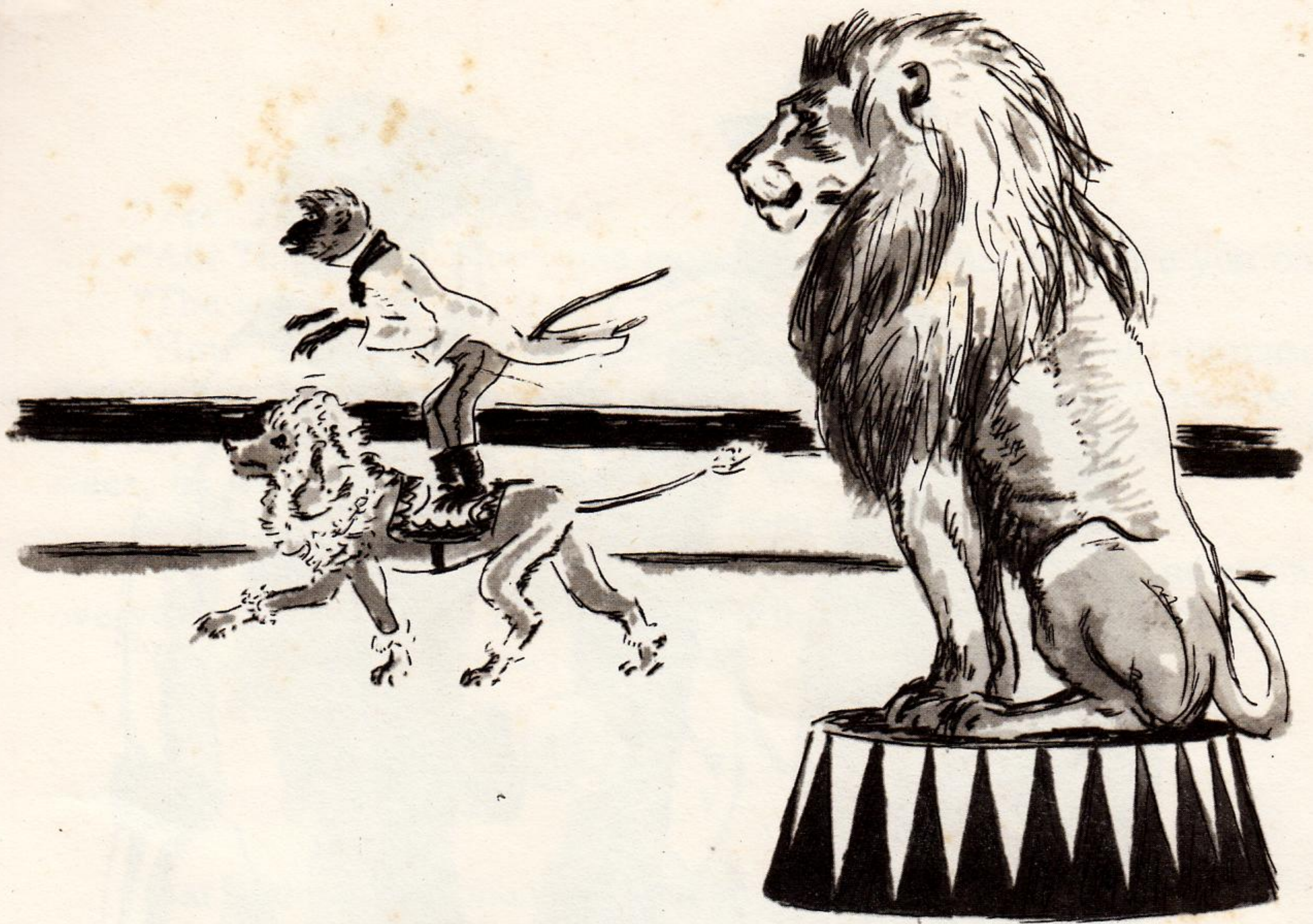


mouth. Only then did he say, "Let you have the elephant? To take home? I don't understand what you mean."

You could see by the man's expression that he also felt like asking Nadya's father whether he had a headache.... But the father hastily explained the situation: his only daughter, Nadya, had a very strange illness which the doctors themselves could not even diagnose properly. She had been bedridden for a month and was getting thinner and losing strength with each passing day. She took no interest in anything, she was bored by everything and was wasting away. The doctors said she was to be entertained, but nothing pleased her; they said her every wish was to be carried out, but she did not wish for anything. Today she had asked to see a real, live elephant. Was this really so impossible?

Then he added in a tremorous voice, as he took hold of the button on the German's coat: "You see ... I certainly hope my child gets well. But ... but ... what if her illness progresses ... and she dies?... Just think: to the





end of my days I'll torture myself with the thought that I did not carry out her last wish, her very last wish!"

The German frowned and scratched his left eyebrow absently with his pinky. Finally, he said, "How old is your daughter?"

"Six."

"Hm... My Liza is also six.... But it will be very expensive. The elephant will have to be brought to your house at night and taken back the next night. It can't be done in the daytime. The public will gather and a big scandal is sure to follow.... So, this means I lose a whole day's earnings, and you will have to cover my losses."

"Oh, certainly. By all means. Don't worry about that."

"Now, will the police let me take the elephant into the house?"

"I'll arrange it. They will."

"One more question: will your landlord let the elephant be taken into your house?"







"Yes. The house is mine."

"Ah! That's fine. Now, one more question: what floor are you on?"

"The second."

"Hm... That's not so good. Does your house have a wide staircase, a high ceiling, a large room, wide doors and a very strong floor? Because my Tommy is nine feet four inches high and fifteen and a half feet long. Besides, he weighs close to a ton."

Nadya's father was silent for a moment.

"You know what?" he said. "Let's go to my house now and examine everything on the spot. If need be, I'll have the doorways widened."

"Good!" said the circus owner.

## V

That night the elephant was taken to visit the sick child.

He walked proudly down the middle of the street in its white robe, nodding its head and curling and uncurling its trunk. Despite the late hour, a large crowd followed him. However, the elephant paid no attention to this, for he was used to seeing hundreds of people at the show every day. He only became a bit angry once, when a street urchin ran right up to him and began making faces and hopping about to amuse the idlers.

At this, the elephant calmly lifted the boy's cap with his trunk and tossed it over a fence that had nails sticking up all along the top.

A policeman entered the crowd and pleaded, "Please disperse, everybody. What's so unusual about this? Hmph! As if you'd never seen a live elephant in the streets before."

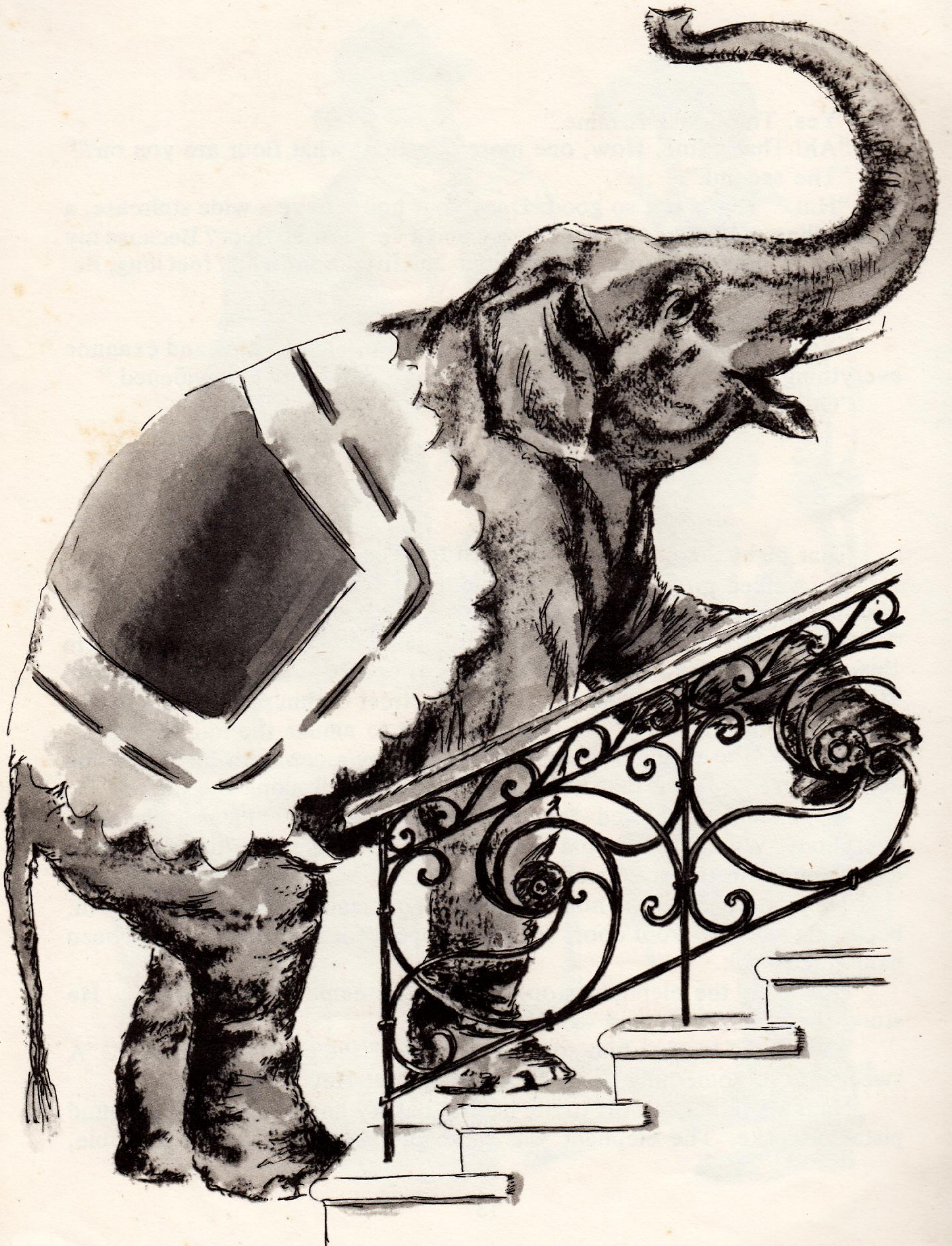
They approached the house. All the doors leading to the dining room, beginning with the front door, were wide open, for all the latches had been hammered back.

However, the elephant stopped when he came to the staircase. He stood there anxiously and would not go on.

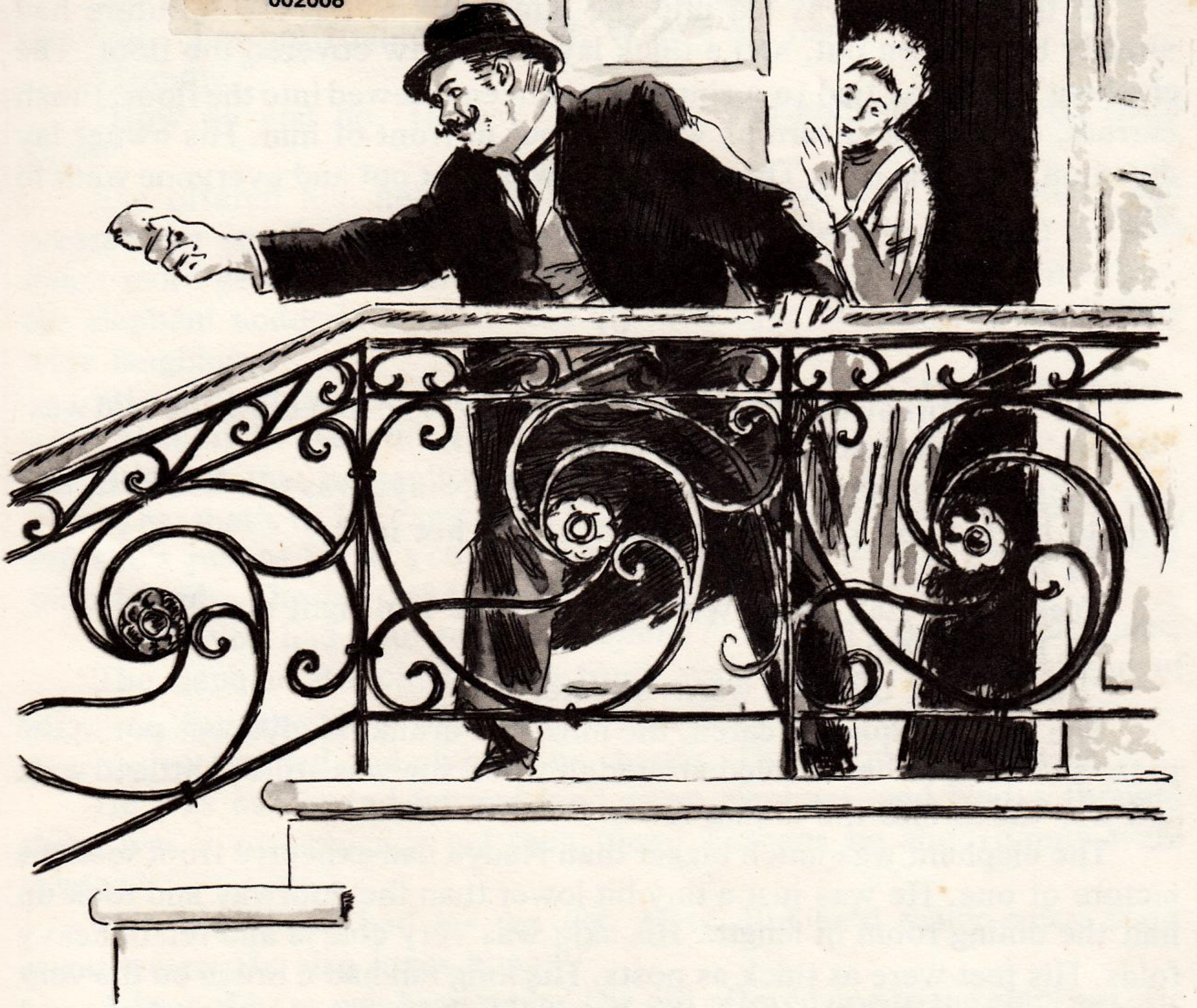
"You have to give him something sweet," the circus owner said. "A sweet bun or something.... Come on, Tommy! Hey, boy!"

Nadya's father ran off to the nearby bakery and bought a large round pistachio cake. The elephant was quite prepared to swallow it whole,









together with the cardboard box, but the owner only gave him a quarter. Tommy liked the taste of it and stretched his trunk out for another chunk. But his owner was too clever for him. He held the cake in his outstretched hand as he backed up the stairs, with the elephant having to follow, his trunk reaching out, his ears flapping. Tommy was given another chunk on the landing.



In this way he was led into the dining room. All the furniture had already been taken out, and a thick layer of straw covered the floor. The elephant's leg was tied to a ring that had been screwed into the floor. Fresh carrots, cabbage and turnips were set out in front of him. His owner lay down on a sofa nearby. Then the lights were put out and everyone went to sleep.

## VI

The little girl awoke at dawn the next day. The first thing she said was: "Where's the elephant? Did he come?"

"Yes," her mother replied. "But he said Nadya was to wash first, and then to have a soft-boiled egg and a cup of hot milk."

"Is he good?"

"Yes, very. Eat, dear. We'll go in to see him right now."

"Is he funny-looking?"

"Rather. Put on your warm sweater."

The egg was quickly eaten, the milk was drunk. Nadya was put in the pram she used to be wheeled around in when she was still too little to walk and was taken into the dining room.

The elephant was much bigger than Nadya had expected from seeing a picture of one. He was just a tiny bit lower than the doorway and took up half the dining room in length. His skin was very coarse and fell in heavy folds. His feet were as thick as posts. His long tail had a brush on the very end. There were big bumps on his head. His drooping ears were huge and looked like burdocks. His eyes were tiny, but intelligent and kind. His tusks had been sawed off. His trunk was like a long snake and ended in two nostrils with a movable lobe like a finger at the tip. If the elephant had stretched his trunk out to its full length, he would have probably touched the window.

The girl was not frightened in the least. She was simply a little awed by his great size. However, her nurse, sixteen-year-old Polya, was terrified and began to scream.

The elephant's owner went over to Nadya and said, "Good morning, Miss. Don't be afraid. Tommy is very good and likes children."



The girl offered the German her small, pale hand. "How do you do?" she said. "I'm not frightened at all. What's his name?"

"Tommy."

"How do you do, Tommy," she said and nodded. "Did you sleep well?"

She offered him her hand, too. The elephant took it carefully and pressed her small, slim fingers with his strong, flexible one and did this much more gently than Mikhail Petrovich, the doctor. At the same time, the elephant nodded his head, and his little eyes became slits, as if they were laughing.

"He understands everything, doesn't he?" the girl said to the German.

"Absolutely everything, Miss."

"It's just that he can't talk, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's it. He can't talk. You know, I have an only daughter, too, and she's just as big as you. Her name is Liza. Tommy and she are very good friends. The best of friends."

"Have you had your tea yet, Tommy?" the girl asked the elephant.

The elephant stretched out his trunk again and blew a strong stream of warm air into the girl's face, making her silky hair fly up.

Nadya laughed and clapped her hands. The German guffawed.

He was as big and fat and kind as an elephant, and Nadya thought there was a resemblance between them. Perhaps he and Tommy were related?

"No, he hasn't had his tea yet, Miss. But he'd really enjoy some sugar-water. He also loves buns."

A tray of buns was brought in. The girl offered one to the elephant. He curled his finger over it quickly, and his trunk carried it up, tucking it someplace under his head, where he had a funny-looking, triangular, hairy under-lip. Nadya could hear the bun scratching against his dry skin. Tommy did the same with a second bun, and a third one, and a fourth one, and a fifth one. He nodded his head in thanks, and his little eyes became still smaller slits from pleasure. The girl laughed happily.

When all the buns were gone, Nadya introduced the elephant to her dolls, saying, "See, Tommy, this pretty doll is Sonya. She's a very kind child, but she won't eat her soup. This is Natasha, Sonya's daughter. She's just starting her lessons, but knows most of the alphabet. And this is



Matryoshka. She was my very first doll. See, she's lost her nose, and her head's glued on, and she hasn't any hair left. But I can't send the old thing away, can I, Tommy? she used to be Sonya's mother, but now she's our cook. Come on, let's play. You'll be the papa, Tommy, and I'll be the mamma, and these will be our children."

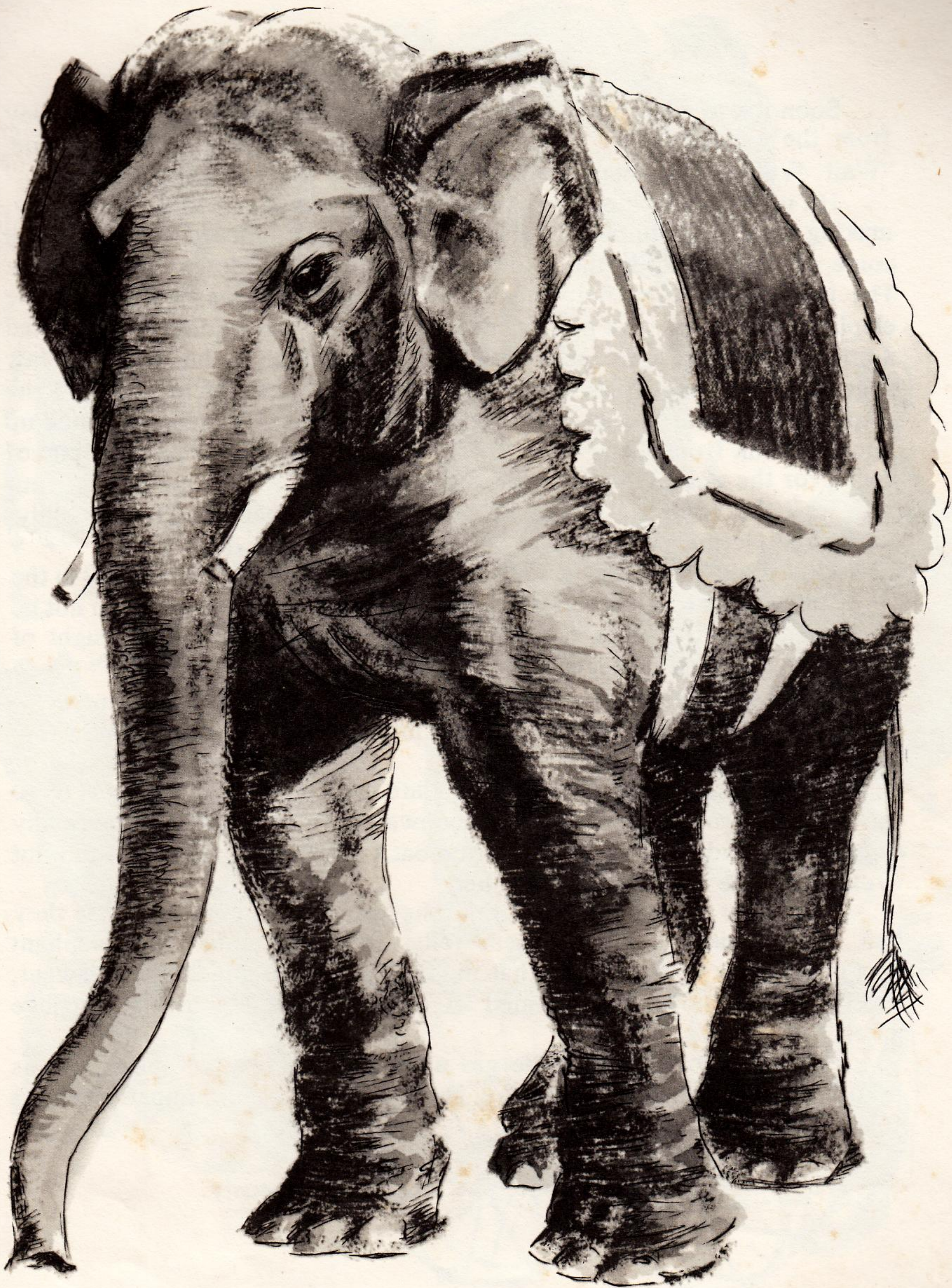
Tommy agreed. He laughed, took Matryoshka by the neck and lifted the doll to his mouth. But it was only for fun. He chewed it a bit and put it back in the girl's lap, although it was now rather wet and slightly crumpled.

Then Nadya showed him a big picture book and said, "This is a horse, this is a canary, this is a rifle.... Here's a bird in a cage, here's a pail, a mirror, a stove, a spade, a crow.... Look! Here's an elephant! It's not at all like one, is it? Elephants are never this small, are they, Tommy?"

Tommy agreed that elephants never were that small. In fact, he didn't like the picture one bit. He lifted the edge of the page with his finger and turned it over.









Soon it was time for dinner, but it was impossible to get Nadya away from the elephant. The elephant's owner came to the rescue and said, "Wait. We'll settle things nicely. They'll have their dinner together."

He told the elephant to sit down. The elephant sat down obediently, making the floor tremble, the dishes rattle in the cupboard and the plaster come off the ceiling in the room below. The girl sat down opposite him. The table was placed between them. A tablecloth was tied around the elephant's neck, and the new friends began to eat their dinner. The girl had a bowl of chicken soup and a cutlet, while the elephant had a pile of raw vegetables and salad. The girl was given a tiny glass of sherry, and the elephant some warm water with a glass of rum in it. He drew the liquid up into his trunk from the bowl with relish. Then there was dessert: a cup of cocoa for the girl and half a cake for the elephant. This time it was a nut cake. All the while the German and the girl's father were in the study, where the German was drinking beer with great pleasure.

After dinner some of her father's friends dropped in. While still in the foyer, they were told of the elephant in the house so that they would not be frightened. At first, they did not believe it, but then, catching sight of Tommy, they huddled together in the doorway.

"Don't be afraid! He's very good," the girl said to calm them.

Nevertheless, they quickly passed into the parlour, stayed but a few minutes and left.

Evening drew near. It was getting late and time for the little girl to go to bed, but it was impossible to get her away from the elephant. She finally fell asleep beside him and was carried back into the nursery. She did not even know she was being put to bed.

That night Nadya dreamed that she married Tommy and that they had many children, all of them jolly little elephants. The elephant was taken back to the circus that night. He, too, dreamed of the sweet, lovely girl. Besides, he dreamed of nut cakes as big as the carriage gate.

The next morning the little girl awoke in the best of spirits and as before, when she had been healthy, she shouted in a loud, impatient voice for all to hear:

"I want my milk!"

When her mother heard her she hurried in joyously.











The little girl suddenly recalled everything that had happened the day before and said: "But where's Tommy?"

Her mother explained that he had to go home to attend to his affairs, because he had children who could not be left alone, but that he had sent his regards to Nadya and had said that he was expecting her to visit him as soon as she got well.

The little girl smiled mischievously and said, "Tell Tommy that I'm all well now!"

